

MAPPING THE KINGDOM OF PLASTIC BAGS: THE TOPOGRAPHY OF FAIRYTALE CYNICISM IN CHELNOCHOVSK-NA-DNIESTRE, UKRAINE

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I am speaking with Dima about how life has changed since the end of the Soviet regime in the Southwestern Ukrainian town of Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre.¹ Here's how he punctuates our conversation: "You can say now that you don't like the president." In an afterthought that follows quickly on the heels of this thought, he adds: "You can't say that you don't like the mayor, but you can say that you don't like the president." Earlier in our conversation, Dima had referred to the mayor as "Marquis Karabas." When I failed to understand the reference, he had said: "Don't you remember, from the fairytale 'Puss in Boots'?" And he recited: "Whose forest is that? Marquis Karabas'. Whose fields are those? Marquis Karabas'. Whose house is that? Marquis Karabas'."²

Dima's account of the state of things in Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre, Ukraine, one of many brilliant emic analyses I have been treated to on the topic, certainly seems to concur with that of those scholars of Eastern Europe (Burawoy 2001, Humphrey 1991, Verdery 1996) who would regard the postsocialist distribution of power in the region as dispersed among more or less independently functioning fiefdoms. In this case, the rapacious lord of the land fabulized by Dima is the mayor of the town, Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko, whose political career in Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre does indeed seem to amount in large part to a consolidation of power carried out through a claiming and grasping up of places on the landscape, for as far as the eye can see. During his second re-election campaign in the spring of 2002, in a seeming caricature of Soviet iconography, and one that was taken to a degree that perhaps only Stalin enjoyed in his lifetime, a banner adorned by a much-larger-than-life-sized hand-painted image of Kruchko's face could be seen physically draping his power across the main road into the city. During the same campaign, an equally oversized image of the mayor's head went up on the town's House

of Culture, and scaled-down versions of this poster could be seen mounted in shop windows and taxicabs throughout the town. The banner was removed after the elections, but the gargantuan poster has remained, along with many of its more diminutive counterparts. But Kruchko's power, of course, extends far beyond the iconographic.

Since his rise to power in the early 1990s—and his influence in the town gained official stature in 1994, when Kruchko won his first of three bids for mayor—Kruchko has come to own numerous enterprises, including (but not nearly limited to) "Kru-tika," a factory and firm producing a number of items, but most notably, tiles for paving sidewalks; at least one gas station located on the edge of town; Chelnochovsk's principal hotel; and the most luxurious and popular restaurant in the town. The restaurant is officially registered under his (estranged) wife's name, and the hotel is said to be registered under the name of his mistress, but Kruchko makes no bones about being the proprietor of these high-profile and prestigious local landmarks. In choosing a name for his restaurant, for example, he did not mince words, entitling it—in a flourish that legitimizes his own entitlement and places him in the context of a long line of newly legitimated (or legitimated anew) monarchs—"Nikolai Dvorets" (Nicholas Palace).

These are the sites that everyone knows of, but a walk through the city streets is likely take one—beknownst or unbeknownst to the walker—past numerous others. Walking to the city bus station one day, for instance, I approached a veterinary kiosk and got close enough to notice the Kru-tika name on it. Kruchko's appropriation of territory also takes more camouflaged, if not exactly subtle, forms. Those small entrepreneurs in the town with whom I had established a relationship of trust acknowledged to me—obliquely and yet unequivocally—that they regularly paid tithes to

the mayor, and that they fully understood that should these tithes cease, their business would be brought to a halt, as well. These same entrepreneurs also made it clear that the mayor himself had reprimanded them for the eyesore that the sidewalks in front of their shops presented (sidewalks whose paving dated back to the last Soviet-era restoration), and commanded them to tile the area in front of their business. This demand has been made on those who rent their shops, as well as those who own them, and of course, the town's only tile concession is Kru-tika. In the spring of this year, the town's taxi stops—theretofore simply designated non-privatized stopping spots on the local landscape—were summarily auctioned off by “the City.” Nothing was built there, nothing produced. These particular points along the lay of the land in Chelnochovsk simply and suddenly became, in the spring of 2002, the private property of particular individuals. By the time the taxi drivers and the other residents of the town learned of the auction, the new owners had already laid claims to the deed. These new owners, Mykola Mykolaivich’s son (also named Mykola Mykolaivich), and three other men closely associated with the Kruchko family and commonly recognized as “*banditi*” (mafia) would heretofore collect dues from the local taxi drivers for granting them the privilege of stopping there. The Kruchko family, it is commonly recognized, profited (at least) twice off of this auction.

But let us to turn to a place on the landscape incontrovertibly occupied by the “Marquis Karabas,” one that marks his power perhaps more conspicuously than any other: his restaurant *Nikolai Dvorets*. The scene, then, is a wedding, and the moments are captured on a video cassette that was sent to me recently by the bride and groom. The wedding took place in August of 2002 in the newly renovated restaurant owned by Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko, on the momentous day that the restaurant reopened after renovations. In one scene from this tape, we find Kruchko risen from his place at the table in his own, eponymous palace, to toast the young couple. He stands in front of the shiny replica of the David he has installed in his newly renovated restaurant. (Amusingly, Kruchko’s head happens to be level with the David’s loins—a coincidence, no doubt, but a suggestive one, given that Kruchko is widely reputed to have lustily helped himself to

more than pieces of land.) He hails the young couple as follows:

Dear Lenochka, Vadim. Esteemed parents. Esteemed guests. *Chelnochovchanye*. Those who have traveled here, who grew up here and lived here. Those who live here. I’m very pleased that the city of Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre has...its place in the difficult hierarchy of government life. I’m doubly pleased to be able to work with such a wonderful person—our Lenochka...[He speaks of Lena’s beauty and intelligence, and wishes the couple a bright future together]....I want you to make your parents happy, and to be the pride of our Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre. After all, it is (this city) that raised you: our streets, our “*Pizza*”(café) our other establishments, our (nightclub) “*Zero*,” in short, our establishments, our City Hall, which has made of you such a serious woman. Let’s drink “*gor’ko*” to the young couple.

Kruchko’s wishes to the couple are bracketed by his telling metaphorical mappings, which—among other things—collapse geography and power, beginning by locating Chelnochovsk’s place as within the hierarchy of government life and ending by appropriating the glory of—and even the credit for—this occasion through the trope of cityscape. His speech abides by wedding convention in overtly celebrating the couple of the day, but yields to political rhetoric that places a rather unconventional demand on the couple: be the pride of the city. And if the bride and groom are to be the pride of the city, he suggests, it is because they have wended their way to this momentous event via the streets of the town, whose landmarks culminate in the mayor’s office itself.

If Kruchko can be found staking his own claims to power through the idiom of landscape, he has others do his bidding for him as well, others who can sketch even more fictitious allegorical geographies. Here at Vadim and Lena’s wedding, for instance, he has the master of ceremonies (his employee at *Nikolai Dvorets*), who sets the scene for the occasion in a fairytale land. In a segment that appears earlier on this tape, the bride and groom—having descended the grand staircase in *Nikolai Dvorets*—stand before the assembled guests, and the master of ceremonies addresses the crowd:

You know, when I first set eyes on this beautiful couple, on these guys, an old, old, fairytale immediately came to mind. And I'd like to take you all by the hand and lead you into this beautiful, magical land called love. In our kingdom, in our state, lived a beautiful queen. One day, she fell to daydreaming, and thought: how happy I would be if I had a little girl with lips scarlet as blood, a face white as freshly fallen snow, with hair black as ebony. That's what the queen thought, and probably the good fairies heard her wish. Because her wish came true. And the parents...named her a beautiful name: Lena. The years went by. The girl grew up and turned into a beautiful woman. But her heart slept. And only the kiss of a handsome prince could wake her. And such a prince came along. He was not a foreigner to her. He lived, and was born, here in our city...

The master of ceremonies' transcendental metaphors transmogrify into concrete references, grounding the lofty qualities they represent in a local landscape that is at once physical and political. The formulaic geography of the standard Russian fairytale opening—"in some kingdom, in some government"—is subtly redrawn here as the transcendental myth gets located in "our" kingdom, "our" government. Lest that "*gosudarstvo*" be understood to signify "state," the setting is quickly localized. The prince/groom is of local provenance, having spent his whole life in "our city." This touch not only diverges from the traditional telling of the tale, in which the prince who wakes Sleeping Beauty comes from a foreign land, but elides certain details of the real-life situation: Lena was born and raised in the town of Potoki, on the other side of the Bridge of Friendship, and now has, therefore, Moldovan citizenship. (She is, in fact, employed in the mayor's office illegally, registered under the name of a woman with Ukrainian citizenship). The official and unofficial hurdles that the couple had to clear in order to actually get married—as a result of the new gravity accorded to this place on the map where the Dniester separates Chelnochovsk from Potoki—made their lives a post-Soviet bureaucratic nightmare for months prior to this evening. And yet, nonetheless, Potoki is unanimously understood in Chelnochovsk as inevitably here, the inescapable other half to the inescapable Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre. Also left out of the story is the fact that the couple is

counting the days until they are issued the documents that will allow them to leave Chelnochovsk for Germany. All of a sudden, in the space of this speech, the inbred nature of Chelnochovsk, the valley that has hermetically sealed in those who haven't managed to escape it, becomes enchanted.

On the outskirts of Vinnitsa, on our way back to Chelnochovsk, after running two red lights because Dima simply has failed to notice them from the angle at which they are hung, we come to a stop before a third one, waiting for the right of way. The traffic light consists of the usual red, yellow, and green lights descending vertically, but the green light at the bottom is flanked by two other green lights, forming a row of lights joined to the standard column in an upside-down T formation. This structure is hung high over the right side of the road, so that it is virtually invisible to the driver of any vehicle on the road. Borya, sitting in the passenger seat and craning his neck to make out the signal, wonders out loud about the logic of such a roadside installation. The question touches off a brief but telling lesson in political history. "What do you want?" is Dima's response. "Our ancestors were..." Here he pauses for a long moment. "Who were those nomads who wandered on the land in the time long before Kievan Rus?" he asks. "*Istorik!*" he remarks, mocking himself, a history teacher turned auto-parts dealer searching the recesses of his memory for the proper name of his national forebears. Finally he finds it: "*Skify*," the Scythians. "Do you know the story of the Scythians?" he asks, and embarks on his own telling of it:

The Romans came. They wanted to conquer the territory, and so they had to fight the Scythians. So they set an appointment to meet at a field and do battle. The Scythians showed up, but while they were waiting for the battle to begin, they caught sight of a herd of wild boar. They wanted to eat them, so they forgot about the battle, and set off after the boar. The Romans understood whom they were dealing with, so they went off, and left the Scythians alone. They put up a few fortresses in the Crimean, and went back to Rome.

We continue on the highway back, its two lanes merging into one at certain segments, before dividing again into two as it cuts through the empty beauty of the fields of the Podolia,

many of which lie barren. (“Nothing grows here,” Dima remarks. Nobody cares.”) A few kilometers before we reach Chelnochovsk, a 600-Series Mercedes passes us. “He’s come to congratulate Kolya (Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko),” Dima says, and seeing our quizzical glances, he adds, “Well, where else could he be going, driving a 600-Series Mercedes with Kiev plates in this direction? To Vindichany, you think?” Not five minutes have passed before a Toyota Land Cruiser whizzes past us in the other direction. “There goes Burchuk,” Dima says, referring to a high-profile legislative candidate favored by Kruchko, and later disqualified by the regional election commission for filing an inaccurate financial report, “That’s his car.” “*proyiklav po syolam*,” he says, switching to a Russian satirically sprinkled with Ukrainian words, “He drove through the villages. Gave out newspaper to the grannies. The grannies had something to wrap their eggs in. They voted for him, our *Skify* did. Such is our country.”

Dima’s political commentary begins at a traffic light on an urban periphery, and wends its circuitous route through the Scythian steppes—a detour of more than two thousand years—before it comes to a halt back in the present in a nearby village marked by popular manipulation and unquestioned poverty (both of material conditions and of political imagination to hold out for better than a newspaper bribe). In so doing, it collapses history, politics, and space into an amorality play, endowing local and contemporary hopelessness with farther-reaching, national and primordial roots that are inseparable from the land itself. Dima’s social commentary is a deeply cynical origin myth in which power and powerlessness are scanned on and embedded in the landscape.

Alexei Yurchak has argued that during the period of late socialism, cynicism was rooted in an understanding of official ideological representation as inconsistent with lived experience. The result was the cultivation of a “pretense misrecognition” that allowed the Soviet subject to navigate the incongruities of the system and of his own participation in it. This pretense misrecognition frequently yielded to joking interactions that released “repression anxiety” by channeling it into “winks of recognition” of this very incongruousness (Yurchak 1997). Notably, for Yurchak, this cynicism of the “normal” late socialist subject did not entail a complete refutation of Soviet

ideals, but rather, a reflection on the considerable gap between those ideals and reality (Yurchak 2003). According to Yurchak, the central role of this ridicule in addressing the “social incongruous” was supplanted in the late 1980s by the “analytic discourse of *glasnost*” (Yurchak 1997).

And yet, in post-Soviet Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre—where an ideological vacuum remains in the space where official Soviet representations once stood, a space that has been filled by the logic of truisms identifying power with might—ridicule flourishes. The arbitrary and self-serving nature of the distribution of power in the town is so thinly whitewashed that the violence underlying it shows plainly through. In fact, the cloaking of the self-interested workings of power in Chelnochovsk, with Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko at the helm, is so patently fictive that one often finds it articulated in a genre that no functioning adult is expected to take at face value—that of fairytale.

Chelnochovchanye tend to respond in an idiom that bears much of the humor found in its Soviet counterpart, but little of the equivocality: a cynicism of mythic dimensions. This discursive genre—a kind of anti-fairytale of a disenchanted land—is mythic in both senses of the word: It assumes the form of a metaphysical legend and the narrative it imparts is unverifiable. In her conversations with perestroika-era Muscovites, Nancy Ries identified a “conventional inventory of generic forms, images, themes, and figurative devices” through which people converted their acts of persistence in the face of the “complete disintegration” of ordinary life into magically heroic narratives that she terms “fairytales” (Ries 1997). In post-Soviet Chelnochovsk, one finds a slightly different story—one in which the trope of the fairytale mocks the very possibility of the heroic or the magical. This idiom expresses a sense of powerlessness perceived as so inherent to contemporary life in the town that it is mapped onto the landscape.

With Dima at the wheel, we have almost completed our journey back from Vinnitsa. We have already passed the sign demarcating the city limits, and are making our way down into the valley of Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre. Out here, on the elevated outskirts of the town, Dima shifts his chin toward a hill at our left. He says he’s proposed to Anya, his wife, that they buy that piece of land up there and build a house to live in. “Anya would be queen

of the mountain,” he says. “Like the princess on the pea (*na goroshine*), only she’d be princess on the mountain (*na gore*). There, she’d be the most authoritative (*samaya krutaya*) in the town. There’s nothing cooler (*kruchshe*) than that in Chelnochovsk. (He’s playing on words here, of course, with “*krutor*” simultaneously signifying both steep and authoritative. Borya joins in: “But she wants to be in the center (of the town). She wants to be in the Kirov (factory) neighborhood.” Dima counters: “She wants to be “*na Birzhe*,” on the ‘Exchange’. We’ll have to pitch a tent there.” He is referring to the political, social, and symbolic center of the town, triangulated by the City Hall on one corner, the billiard hall on another, and the “*Pizza*,” (the most popular café, where much of the high and low drama of the town gets played out) across the street. The *Birzha* is formed by the nexus of those landmarks, and at one particular spot on the sidewalk, one can see—at any hour—a congregation of “*krutiye*,” the authoritative men in the town associated—marginally or more than marginally—with the shady activities inseparable from power. We continue our descent into the city. As we pull into the center of town, Dima is moved again to poetry: “Kingdom of plastic bags!” he declares Chelnochovsk, with ironic emotion. “We have ‘American Beauty’ here everyday. The dance of the plastic bags! Then, as he parks the car in front of the auto-parts store he co-owns with two other men from the town he cries out, “Hello, my motherland!”

Dima’s inverted fairytales are perhaps extraordinarily eloquent, but they are, nevertheless, couched in a genre to which many *Chelnochovchanye* repeatedly turn, to express a sense of place that perhaps cannot be expressed without great subtlety of humor. The absurdity of official fairytales is time and again parodied as obscenity, in ingenious spontaneous riffs on the genre that invert the attribution of enchantment to the valley of Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre. If the master of ceremonies’ speech went through the motions of endowing the mayor with a power of mythic dimensions—a power that cannot be uprooted from the very land itself—other *Chelnochovchanye* can be found to endow cynicism itself with mythic dimensions, sketching an iconography of the absurd that begins to account for how it feels to live in Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre, Ukraine.

I would conclude with just one more such vivid representation, and let it have the last word. The scene is the following: I am at a *devishnik*, an all-female party at Dima and Anya’s house to celebrate their daughter’s seventh birthday. The guest of honor has long ago gone to bed, and the women still sit at the table, drinking, telling stories and jokes, toasting. One of the women pronounces a toast. It’s a toast about the end of the world, and it goes something like this:

The end of the world is coming to Chelnochovsk. A black cloud hangs over the city. It moves toward The Big Tent (restaurant). Bak! The Big Tent is no more. It moves toward *Nikolai Dvorets*. Bak! *Nikolai Dvorets* is no more. It moves toward our window. It peers in, and we are sitting here cozily at the table, drinking. So I’d like to drink to this: that no matter what happens, even the end of the world, we don’t give a fuck.

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Endnotes

1. Out of concern for those living in the town, I have changed the names of many of the people and places mentioned here, including the name of the paper's main character—the town itself. By any name, however, "Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre," remains a very real place in the world, and its place in the world is of profound importance for those whose lives are located there. I could not, therefore, seek to disguise the terrain on which "Chelnochovsk" is lived. Rather, since this paper is about mappings in and of the city of Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre, I will begin by placing the town on the map in a rather conventional (if approximate) fashion. Chelnochovsk is located in the Southwest of Ukraine, at the intersection of a geographical and political border where the Dniester River divides Ukraine from Moldova. The Bridge of Friendship, which has long connected Chelnochovsk to its other half, the Moldovan town of Potoki, and which was so nonchalantly permeable and during the Soviet period, is now choked with the social and economic charge of international crossings. This paper moves on to present other maps—visual and verbal—that would appear less conventional; it aims, however, to explore some of the conventions located in those maps.
2. The verbal exchanges on which this paper is based were carried out either in standard Russian, or in a highly Russified Ukrainian (or, more accurately in this case, a slightly Ukrainianized Russian) often called surzhyk. For more extended discussions of contemporary linguistic negotiations in Ukraine, see Bilaniuk 2002 and Golbert 2001